

Opening Minds

In the name of our risen Lord, dear friends in Christ: Today's Gospel lesson is St. Luke's description of what happened when Jesus appeared to his gathered disciples on the evening of the first Easter. It may sound very familiar to you, because last week's Gospel was St. John's account of the very same events. Both Evangelists tell the same story. And as we would expect, there are no contradictions in the two versions they tell; but there are differences in emphases. That is to say, each of the writers is highlighting certain details in order to stress the theological ideas he wants to convey.

John's account, you will recall, put the emphasis on the fear the disciples were experiencing. As the light was waning away on that first day of the week, they were huddled together in the dark behind locked doors. Dangerous enemies surrounded them on all sides. And though they had heard – and some were coming to believe – that Jesus was indeed alive again, they weren't sure that was good news. They had all disbelieved and abandoned him. They swore up and down that they would stick by him; but when the hour of trial came, they all fled like cowards. If it were now true that Jesus was indeed alive, then their next meeting would be uncomfortable to say the least. They think Jesus would meet them with stern words and harsh judgment. So this room they're holed up in, which was very likely the same room in which they had, only a few nights before, celebrated the Passover with Jesus (when he instituted the Lord's Supper), had now become for them a prison of panic and a tomb of terror.

And then, suddenly, in this fear-filled place Jesus appears giving his disciples God's peace and forgiveness. There are no angry words, no recriminations; only the sweet message of comfort that sets them free. "Your sins are forgiven. Through my body crucified, through my blood shed for you, you are at peace with God." And then Jesus gives them the Holy Spirit and the authority to proclaim this same forgiveness to others – to set them free also from the shame and guilt of sin and from the fear of God's judgment. These are the themes that John stresses.

In Luke's telling of the same story, while fear is certainly a big part of the picture, the emphasis is more on how the disciples' unbelief and misunderstanding are turned to faith and to joy through the appearance of the risen Lord and particularly through his ongoing teaching. Maybe I could say it this way: in John's account, Jesus speaks comfort to every sinner's heart; in Luke's account, Jesus is opening minds to understand.

This comes into clearer focus when we take into consideration what comes immediately before today's reading from Luke's Gospel. It's the story of Jesus appearing to the two Emmaus disciples. They are not part of the 12, rather they belong to that larger circle of followers who came with Jesus to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, one week earlier. Now their hopes and dreams are shattered, and they are, in a sense, fleeing the scene of the crime.

As they walk along in confusion, trying to make sense of what's happened in the past few days, Jesus comes up alongside them as if he is a fellow traveler headed in the same direction. They see him; but they don't recognize that it's Jesus. Actually it says their eyes were kept from recognizing him. Jesus asks what they're talking about. And they both stop and stare at him in stunned silence. Finally one of them speaks: "Where have you been that you don't know all the things that have happened around here in the last week or so?" "What things?" Jesus inquires. "Tell me about it." So they do. They tell him all about Jesus, how he

was a great miracle working prophet and preacher. They tell him how they and many others sincerely believed that this Jesus was the Christ of God, the long promised Savior of Israel. They tell him how things turned sour after they came to Jerusalem, how Jesus was arrested and condemned by the religious authorities, and how he was handed over to the Romans for crucifixion. They even tell him about the women who, earlier on this same day, went to the tomb, found it empty, and came back saying that they'd seen angels who said that Jesus had risen from the dead.

And the thing to see is that they have the whole story. It's right there in front of their faces, just like Jesus is; but they do not recognize what they're looking at. They're eyes are open; but their minds are closed. Thus it is that seeing, they do not see; and hearing, they do not understand; nor do they believe. And Jesus takes them to task for it. "How foolish you are and slow to believe all the prophets have written." And beginning with Moses and all of the prophets, Jesus begins to explain the Scriptures to them – to open their minds to understand that everything that happened concerning this man Jesus, happened precisely as the Holy Word of God said that it would. For their parts, they are utterly astonished. They hang on his every phrase and soak up his words like sponges. By the time they reach their destination, some seven miles from Jerusalem, they invite this stranger into their home for the evening. They want to hear more. But more importantly, through the opening of their minds to the Scriptures, they have come to believe that Jesus has indeed risen from the dead and that he is the Christ and Savior of the world. And all this, still without recognizing that the man speaking to them is Jesus himself.

It's not until they're at the table dining together; then Jesus takes a loaf of bread, blesses it by giving thanks, and breaks it for distribution. In that instant, the veil lifts from their eyes. They know that it's Jesus. And just as suddenly, he vanishes from their sight. For the second time that day, they stare in stunned silence. "Of course; how could we have been so blind? And didn't our hearts burn within us while he spoke to us on the way?"

They get up from the table at once and quickly hustle back the seven miles to Jerusalem. This is news the other disciples simply have to hear. They arrive late and are admitted to the room where the disciples are hiding behind locked doors. Considering how edgy they all were inside, I imagine their frantic knocking was the occasion for a new wave of panic to sweep through the room. But once inside, they tell their story about their mysterious traveling companion, how he explained everything that had happened to Jesus was according to the Word of God, and how, in the breaking of the bread Jesus was revealed to them.

And just as they are speaking about Jesus appearing to them in the breaking of bread, Jesus becomes visible again, this time in the room where all the disciples are. That's where today's text begins. And the amazing thing is that even though they recognize him and they've heard everything the Emmaus disciples have told them, they still can't believe it's actually Jesus in the flesh. They suppose it must be the ghost of Jesus come back to haunt them. The reason for their confusion and disbelief is that their minds are still closed to what the Lord is revealing to them. Not yet understanding the Scriptures, they are forced to look within themselves for an explanation for what their eyes are telling them. In a sense, they are in the same place the Emmaus disciples were before Jesus opened their minds *without* their recognizing him. The difference is that they see and know it's Jesus; but they don't understand. The only plausible idea they can come up with is that he must be a spirit. How else could he have come into a locked room? They just don't get it.

And so Jesus goes through a number of extraordinary measures to convince them that yes, I am here in the body. “Why are you troubled, and why do you doubt? Look at my hands and feet. Touch me and see that I have flesh and bones.” They do *and still they don't believe it*. This can't be happening. It defies reason. It's too good to be true. So Jesus asks if they'll give him something to eat – again to prove that he's really here in his risen body.

Now we're not told if that finally convinced them; but I rather doubt that it did. I mean if seeing, hearing, and touching him didn't do the job, how would watching him eat do the trick? No, what brings them on board and gets them to believe is his exposition of the Scriptures. “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.

And through the Scriptures he showed how it was written that the Christ had to suffer and die for sin and then rise on the third day. Which passages did he use to show that? We're not told. But then, it doesn't make any difference because this is the consistent and core message of the entire Scripture. It's always there, right before your eyes; but until Jesus opens your mind, you'll never see it. Once he does, however, you'll see it everywhere.

And like I say, I can't be certain about which prophetic passages or Bible stories Jesus used to open their minds; but with Luke's emphasis on Jesus appearing in the breaking of the bread, and because it is *the* Old Testament salvation story, and because Jesus and the disciples celebrated the Passover together just a couple of nights before – on very the same day that he was later arrested, tried and crucified – I'm 99.99% sure that one of the places he took them was to Bible's account of the Exodus from Egypt.

You remember that story: how God's people were slaves, forced to do the Pharaoh's bidding; and how they were suffering in misery from the oppression of their cruel taskmasters. But the Lord heard their cries, and sent them a deliverer in the person of Moses. Nine devastating plagues later, the people of God were still in bondage; so determined was the Pharaoh not to let the people go. But then came the last plague: the death of the firstborn. God's people were safe from the angel of death, protected by the blood of the lambs smeared on their doorframes. They feasted on the roasted flesh of the lambs whose blood marked and protected them while the firstborn of Egypt died. And in the morning, so great was the cry of his people, the Pharaoh was compelled to let Israel go free. He had no choice.

The Lord wanted his people to remember that fateful night. He wanted them never to forget what he had done to save them. And so he commanded that every year they reenact and retell the story while consuming a sacred meal. Again, this is what Jesus was doing with his disciples the night he was arrested – the night that he instituted the Lord's Supper in the context of the Passover meal. Knowing this, you can practically hear Jesus connecting the dots for them. For them, the Passover was an ancient ritual; a remembrance of a salvation event deep in Israel's past. But now Jesus opens their minds to understand it. “Don't you see? You are the people in bondage. You are slaves to sin and its consequences. And for it God condemns you death. There's no escape. But in his mercy, God hears your cries. He sends you a Savior – a man like Moses – that's *me*. And you too are set free. How? By the death of God's firstborn, his only begotten Son – that's *me* too. And you are protected and marked by the blood of the lamb, God's Lamb – also *me*, whose flesh you eat and whose blood you drink for the forgiveness of your sins. The whole story is about your salvation through me.”

And it still is; the entire Scriptures are about Jesus and the salvation we have in him. And by learning the stories and by reading the Prophets and Psalms, Jesus continues to open our minds even today – open our minds so that we can see and truly believe and trust in him. This is important, because I often run into people (and I imagine you do too) who say, “If only Jesus would appear to me, then I would believe in him.” It’s not true. The fact is that like the disciples, even seeing, they wouldn’t. And they would be forced to come up with explanations: “It must have been a hallucination or a dream or something I ate.” Their minds would still be closed. And the one thing they never want to do is to go the Scriptures through which Jesus opens minds so that they can see and know him. Thus they remain trapped in their spiritual darkness and lost in their sins.

May that never be true of us; rather knowing as we do that Jesus opens our minds to see, to know, and to trust in him through the exposition of the Holy Scriptures, let’s make it our goal to know and trust him ever more thoroughly. Let’s dive deeply into the Word. Let’s stay in it. Let’s live in it. That’s where we’ll know that it’s Jesus. And then we too can be his witnesses in this world, announcing his death for sin and his resurrection from the dead, and proclaiming repentance and forgiveness in his name to all who are willing to hear. In this way they too will come to know and trust Jesus, and they’ll see him where he makes himself visible to us: in the breaking of the bread. God grant it to us and to them for Jesus’ sake. In his Holy Name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!